

Coffee cup as canvas

By **TOM BERG**

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JEBB HARRIS, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Cheeming Boey shows a polystyrene foam cup titled "Run Baby Run," on which he is shown arriving on the back of a turtle.

NEWPORT BEACH • Ask for a drink of water at Cheeming Boey's apartment and it's likely to come in a foam cup – with a drawing on it.

Made by Boey. With his Sharpie pen.

He is a foam cup artist. His mistakes end up as drinks.

His apartment is filled with disposable white cups covered with intricate patterns of waves, fish and birds; scenes of noodle shops and Japanese gods; glimpses of life in Malaysia, San Francisco and now Orange County.

"I'm often asked, 'Why don't you draw on something more solid – like a ceramic cup?'" he says.

"Yes, Styrofoam is kind of flimsy but it's strong in other ways," he adds, using the word "Styrofoam" as most people do, generically, and incorrectly, to describe cups made of polystyrene foam.

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"When you drop it, it never cracks."

His first piece of cup art can be traced back to an Irvine trash can in 2006.

He'd just moved here as a computer animator. Found himself a little coffee shop. Sat down to watch people and, you know, doodle.

But he had no paper. So he grabbed a trashed cup and began drawing. Suddenly, a light bulb went off in his head.

"I knew I was onto something," says Boey, 31, of Newport Beach. "It was beautiful."

Slowly, cups started to mount on his shelf at work. Friends *oohed* and *ahhed*. He got serious.

Then came the real transformative moment, when a friend asked this: "Sure, they're nice, but who'd pay money for *that?*"



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In his Newport Beach apartment, Cheeming Boey prepares some of his art-covered foam cups, protected in plastic cases, to take to an art show.

JOURNEY WEST

Boey was born in Malaysia, the son of a man whose songbirds were so prized he once was offered a Mercedes-Benz for a single zebra-necked dove.



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"The Bird King" wanted his son to excel in math. Boey preferred computer games and drawing comics.

Since demand for that was particularly low in Malaysia, Boey ended up studying animation in San Francisco and was hired to design computer games.

He still remembers his father saying: "Einstein didn't amount to anything until he was 30." So age 29 felt momentous.

That year, Boey launched a daily, online comic-strip called "Twenty9." He traveled with total strangers—even paying their way—to overcome what his girlfriend called a self-centered streak.

And he made a vow.

To illustrate this point, he lifts a foam cup he drew that year. It shows him crossing the ocean on a leatherback turtle.

"That's my own journey West," he says. "The boat sinking behind me is the art movement in the East with my friends who are artists back in Asia. They won't have the same kind of life I have here as an artist."

His vow? A response to those who said no one would pay money for such cups.

"Don't tell someone who's stubborn that no one's going to buy your stuff," he told them.

And he stubbornly vowed to become the Styrofoam Cup King.

OH-OH

Styrofoam—or, rather, the foam products most people refer to as "Styrofoam"—gets a bad rap: It's cheap. Disposable. Never degrades. The coffee cup you toss away today will still be polluting some ocean or landfill after your grandchildren die.

About the only time it makes the news is when some city bans its use—as more than 20 California cities have done. Or when some art auction sells a foam cup with a dead ladybug in it for \$29,900—as happened in 2001.

All of which makes the simple, 4-cent cup the epitome of Pop Art. It's at once kitschy and unhip and dismissed by all.

Yet it can be a demanding medium to master. It's curved. It smudges. You can't redo mistakes. And every drawing must reconnect to its start.

His first drawings were simple: Boey at work; Boey eating; Boey (humorously) scolding colleagues for knocking over his foam cups.

Then stories began to emerge: Two faceless diners appear to be the subject of a cup titled "Wait." But the real story lies in two legs seen below a room divider on "back."

"That's me," he says. "I used to wait for my ex to get off work. I'd stand off to the side so I wouldn't rush her."



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"This is actually about her," he says, of his former girlfriend of eight years, "but she's not in the picture."

Later, he experimented with pointillism and finer lines. He studied Japanese woodcut artist Katsushika Hokusai's use of perspective. And he grew playful.

His "Wired" series consists of four cups –"Him," "Her," "This" and "That"– each with an individual face on one side and a common set of telephone wires on the other, connecting all four and symbolizing how he stays in touch with relatives in Malaysia.

One day he packed up several cups and drove to Laguna Beach. He wound up at Marion Meyer Contemporary Art, a fine-art gallery. Meyer, who features nationally known artists, took one look at the young man carrying a paper bag of foam cup "art" and said to herself: "Oh-oh."

THE BEST STUFF

Then she saw the cups.

"I personally liked them," says the former president of the Laguna Beach Art Walk. "And that's how I select artists. When I connect to the energy and passion someone creates in their art, that's when I like it."

Meyer invited Boey to display his cups at her gallery during the monthly Art Walk.

Each month, he's attracted larger crowds. Made more sales. Why? His art is unique and his stories connect with people. Even the story of how he started.

"It was a mistake," he says, "but sometimes they make the best stuff."

He was new in town, bored and had no paper.

"It was actually of a blessing in disguise," he says. "When you're bored, you tend to experiment."

There is still, however, the issue of his medium.

"I'm pretty (environmentally) green," admits gallery owner Meyer. "Many of us are."

When she tells friends about her new artist's work –on foam cups– she's often greeted by raised eyebrows.

"But you can turn that around too," she says. "It's good to create lasting art on them that won't be thrown away."

Says Boey, who also draws on banana skins: "These cups last thousands of years, and my Sharpie says it's permanent ink. These things are going to last generations. It's archival material."

Learn more about Boey's art and daily blog at www.iamboey.com.

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